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AUTHOR Fearnside, Rob
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ABSTRACT

The Victorian school accountability framework is designed specifically for Victorian public schooling in the 1990s. These schools have three chief characteristics: (1) a high level of school autonomy in operational decisions about research allocation, human-resource management, and staff selection; (2) a common framework for curriculum and assessment; and (3) school councils made up of parent, community, and staff representatives with significant control over school policy within broad government frameworks. The accountability framework has two main purposes: "to satisfy legitimate expectations of government about accountability for the outcomes of schooling, and to assist schools and teachers to improve standards of student learning." The review process includes two stages: school self-assessment and external verification. As part of its internal evaluation processes, the Office of Review invited school verification panel members to complete an evaluation survey. A total of 2,810 surveys were returned, and respondents are providing very strong endorsement of the school review process and the benefit of this for the schools. An appendix is provided on School Annual Report Measures. (DFR)

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Quality Assurance in Victorian Schools: An approach to School Improvement

The School Review program in Victoria, Australia

An Evaluation

Rob Fearnside
Assistant General Manager
Office of Review
Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training
e-mail: fearnside.rob.e@edumail.vic.gov.au
Office of Review Website: http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/ofreview

R. Fearnside

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Introduction

At the end of last year, all government schools in Victoria will have taken part in a school review. December 1999 represented the completion of a cycle which began with the first conferences on school charters in the second semester of 1993.

It's been, to say the least, an interesting journey. Nostalgia can slip easily and quickly into self-indulgence, but it's fair to say that there are many positive stories to be told about the road travelled by Victorian schools in reaching our current position. Accountability and school improvement are now seen as two sides of the same coin and data collection and analysis are universally seen as routine and essential ingredients of good school planning and decision-making. It's instructive that the biggest complaint made by staff in the Office of Review in 1999 is that schools now want so much data and such sophisticated analysis that we're struggling to keep up with the demand.

So where are we at the end of the first cycle of school reviews? Our analysis in the Office of Review is as follows:

- Schools now have solid baselines of performance data covering at least two, usually three and sometimes four years;
- Schools have identified the two or three strategic areas, where concerted improvement efforts are likely to yield the biggest pay-offs; and
- Schools are working on the links between good teaching strategies, good student management strategies, good human resource management practices and standards of student learning.

As the second cycle of reviews is about to commence and schools are trialling new tools to help them examine their processes in detail, the Office of Review has commissioned an evaluation of the experience of the first three years of school review. The evaluation was conducted by Dr David Gurr of the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne.

This document is an executive summary of Dr Gurr's findings and recommendations. The full text of his report, including statistical tables can be found on the Office of ReviewWebsite: http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/ofreview

An International Perspective on School Evaluation/Review

At the broadest level of generalisation, school performance review programs around the world seem to fit into one of two categories:

1. **"high stakes" strategies** based on state or district testing programs. These programs, such as those used in Kentucky and Philadelphia in the USA use sanctions in the form of school closure and reconstitution combined with incentives in the form of cash payments for improved results and support in the form of professional development and high levels of investment in information technology. While they are often successful in improving standards, especially from a low base, they are generally accompanied by high levels of resentment from parents and, especially, teachers and principals. In the USA, this resentment has occasionally found expression in expensive legal challenges which can distract the reform program for months at a time;

2. **external inspection programs**, involving teams of inspectors visiting a school for a week or more at a time and assessing almost all aspects of the school's operations. These visits usually include an evaluation of teachers' effectiveness through classroom inspections. The programs operated by the Office for Standards in Education in England (OFSTED) and the Educational Review Office in New Zealand are good examples. These programs are very thorough, but they are expensive to operate (OFSTED spends about $A180m per annum on school inspections) and they also generate some anger and resentment among teachers.

In other words, school performance is evaluated either by reference primarily to student learning as indicated by test results or by "whole school" evaluation techniques which can be both intrusive and expensive.

Nevertheless, it is important for parents, governments, societies and students that school performance is evaluated thoroughly, that the learning standards achieved by students are clearly articulated and that strategies for improved standards are able to be determined through examination of the effectiveness of the school as a total organisation. In Victoria, we have attempted to respond to these imperatives using a three year framework of school planning, reporting and performance review, responsive to the needs of schools and the community.

The Accountability Framework

The Victorian school accountability framework *Quality Assurance in Victorian Schools* is designed specifically for Victorian public schooling in the 1990s. Victoria is one of six Australian states. The states have constitutional responsibility for school education. There are 1650 Victorian public schools, serving 500,000 students.

They have three chief characteristics:

- a high level of school autonomy in operational decisions about resource allocation, human resource management and staff selection;

- a common framework for curriculum and assessment developed by an independent Board of Studies representative of all school sectors, government and non-government, business and the community; and

- school councils made up of parent, community and staff representatives with significant control over school policy within broad government frameworks.

The framework is derived both from school effectiveness literature and from the "quality" movement prevalent in modern business practice.

The Framework in Operation

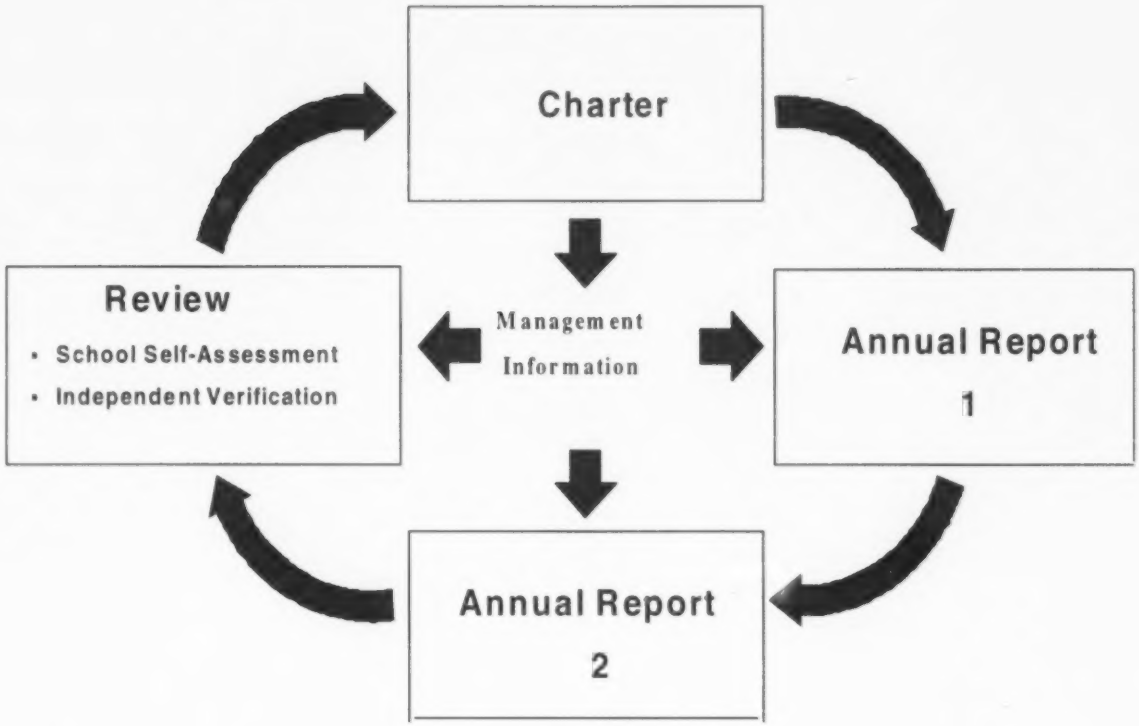
The key processes in the accountability framework are the school charter, the school annual report and the triennial school review. Each is sponsored at the school by the school council, within guidelines published by the Office of Review. The framework operates as a structured cycle of internal school planning, monitoring and evaluation with a component of external, objective assessment and accountability.

The accountability framework, *Quality Assurance in Victorian Schools* (Office of Review, 1997a), is the main mechanism through which the performance of Victorian government schools is monitored. There are two main purposes of the framework: 'to satisfy legitimate expectations of government about accountability for the outcomes of schooling, and to assist schools and teachers to improve standards of student learning"

The accountability framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Accountability Cycle



The accountability framework provides an integrated planning, development and reporting package for schools. Its key elements are the school charter, which is a three year school development plan; the school annual report, in which schools report on their performance to the community and to the Department using a common set of performance measures; and the triennial school review, which includes a school self assessment and verification of that assessment by an external school reviewer.

The verification process is conducted by a panel including members of the school's community and the external reviewer. Typically, members of the school panel would include the school council president, the principal and several senior teaching staff selected at the discretion of the principal.

School reviews are conducted at the conclusion of the school's triennial charter period. Reviews use the data and information generated in school annual reports and other performance data to evaluate and report in a school self assessment

report on progress towards the achievement of goals and priorities established in the school charter.

The report uses three year trend performance data to analyse the effectiveness of the school in its core operational areas with a significant emphasis on student achievement and recommends strategies for performance improvement.

The review process includes two stages:

- School self assessment conducted within guidelines developed by the Office of Review;

- External verification, conducted by an independent school reviewer, who will verify that the school's self assessment represents a fair statement of the school's achievements over the three years of its charter and contains sufficient challenge to support improved performance in the future.

These two steps generate a report to the school council and to the Department of Education containing agreed recommendations to be incorporated into the school's next charter so that the three year cycle of planning, monitoring, reporting and review begins anew.

The two stage process also reinforces the role of the accountability framework in promoting a partnership between the Department of Education and the school. The independent reviewer represents the Department of Education in a discussion with the school about its achievements and its plans for continued improvement based on the school's self assessment.

Following a public tender, ten companies currently have three year contracts to conduct the verification process on behalf of the Department.

The role of the independent reviewer is critical in encouraging the school to set challenging goals and improvement priorities for the next three year charter period.

In the process of planning for the next three year charter period, school reviewers have witnessed and encouraged:

- a shift in emphasis from provision oriented goals towards goals directed towards improved outcomes

- a willingness on the part of schools to set higher expectations and specific targets;

- a recognition of the importance of regular monitoring and assessment to provide detailed, systematic and ongoing profile of the progress of all students. "Data driven", "evidence based", "value added" approaches are increasingly part of the professional conversation;

- a shift in emphasis from multiple priorities, often broadly defined, to fewer, more clearly defined outcome based priorities. Literacy, numeracy and information technology are the most common priority areas;

- a realization that central to ongoing improvement efforts are appropriate beliefs and understandings about student learning and a supportive and healthy school climate and culture. The staff survey is a very important diagnostic tool in assisting reviewers to encourage schools to see the relationship between all parts of their organization in their attempt to lift standards

In the context of balancing affirmation with challenge and verification with improvement, school reviewers have encouraged a deeper analysis of student achievement data and school management data, particularly staff survey data, to promote the shift in emphases noted above.

The importance of goal congruence, of alignment between the elements of curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and school organization, management and leadership have clearly emerged through the verification meetings

What has also emerged is a continuum of school performance from high achievement to below expectations. Whilst the language of the failing school has not been used, targeted school renewal policies and approaches are clearly necessary for a percentage of schools identified through the review process.

The Accountability Framework adopts a "low stakes" approach to public information. Local communities are entitled to access to charters, annual reports and school review reports so that they can evaluate the performance of their local school on the basis of objective and comprehensive information. The Office of Review does not publish information which will identify any individual school in order to avoid labelling of schools as 'failing' or 'underperforming'.

In summary then, the Victorian accountability framework has the following characteristics:

- it is an integrated program of review and improvement, which combines planning through the school charter, with monitoring and reporting through the annual report and with evaluation and review through the school review.;

- it engages schools in a partnership with the Department of Education in evaluation of performance and in planning for improved performance;

- it defines through its 'like' school benchmarks, reasonable and achievable improvement standards for schools;

- it integrates performance indicators (Appendix 1) relating to all the core elements of the operations of a school as an organisation into an overall assessment of school performance. In this regard, test results and teachers' judgements of student progress are combined with reliable and valid surveys of parent and staff satisfaction, student absence rates and analysis of the ultimate outcomes of schooling in terms of participation in work or further study to develop a picture of the performance and overall health of the school; and

- it combines performance assessment with public and agreed planning for strategic improvements in performance.

The Victorian accountability framework is, in other words, both integrated and comprehensive. It uses innovative techniques such as staff and parent surveys, as well as more common performance indicators such as test results and, in its focus on the whole school, it recognises a key finding of international research into school effectiveness: that effective schools take comprehensive and integrated approaches to improvements in performance.

A key test of the feasibility of public sector initiatives is what might be described as the 'test of scale'. In summary, this refers to the capacity of initiatives to be implemented in large scale service delivery areas like schools or hospitals. The accountability framework is now implemented in all Victorian Government schools and all 1650 schools have now participated in the review program. Victoria is currently the only Australian state with a school planning, reporting and review framework in operation in all schools.

Research Focus

As part of its internal evaluation processes, the Office of Review in 1997 and 1998 invited school verification panel members to complete an evaluation survey. The survey was completed after the review report had been presented to the school council and faxed to the Office of Review. The survey included data about: the status of the person completing the survey (for example, principal, school council representative or teacher); the school name; the school number; the verification date (year and semester); and the time spent in the verification meeting.

The survey questions were divided into two broad categories: 15 closed response questions using a four point scale in 1997 and a six point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) in 1998; and 2 open response questions. Survey questions were designed to assess panel members' reactions to the total school review experience and to the performance of the external reviewer. (Appendix 2)

2810 surveys were returned at a response rate of nearly 57%. All of these surveys were used in the analysis of the 15 closed response questions. The open response questions were content analysed for 640 (22.8% sample) of these surveys.

Principal Findings

The strength of the ratings in both 1997 and 1998 is remarkable. For the 1997 survey (intakes 1 and 2) all questions had a mean rating of 3.2 or higher on the four-point scale, with modal ratings of 4 for 12 of the 15 questions. For the 1998 survey (intakes 3 and 4) all questions had a mean rating of 4.9 or higher on the six-point scale, with modal ratings of 6 for 14 of the 15 questions.
In both years, the highest ratings were given to the following questions:

1. The verification meeting was conducted in an open and relaxed atmosphere. (3.8 in 1997 and 5.8 in 1998)

2. The school reviewer communicated clearly and listened to the information presented by the panel. (3.8 in 1997 and 5.7 in 1998)

3. The school reviewer established a productive and professional working relationship with the school panel. (3.7 in 1997 and 5.7 in 1998)

4. The reviewer demonstrated an understanding of the operation of Victorian schools. (3.7 in 1997 and 5.7 in 1998)

These responses appear to replicate similar findings noted by the Auditor-General (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 1997: 58) in his review of the Accountability Framework conducted in 1997. The Auditor-General reported 90% of principals and 76% of self-assessment panel members satisfied with the performance of the reviewer.

In both years, the percentage of positive responses (those greater than or equal to 3 for 1997 and those greater than or equal to 4 for 1998) to all questions was greater than 94%. Question 15, *Overall, the process of school review has been very useful to our school*, had a mean score of 3.5 in 1997 and 5.4 in 1998, with 54.9% in 1997 and 59.2% in 1998 strongly agreeing with this statement, and more than 97% rating this positively in both years. These findings are consistent with those of the Co-Operative Research Project, a five year longitudinal study of principal perceptions. In this survey, items concerned with the Accountability Framework, especially school improvements associated with the school charter were consistently rated highly by principals (Cooperative Research Project, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1997, 1998).

Primary schools generally reported more positive responses than did secondary colleges and principals more positive responses than other school panel members.

Benefits

In their responses to the open questions in the survey, 577 (90.2%) of respondents indicated one or more benefits associated with undertaking the school review process.

The main benefits included:

- increased knowledge and understanding about school performance (identifying strengths, weaknesses, performance levels and achievement, and increased awareness and understanding)
- increased involvement of the school community (school council, staff, team building)
- improved planning (articulating future directions, writing of the school charter made easier and increased understanding of the school)
- professionalism of school reviewers (objective, supportive, perceptive, and positive).

Responses did not seem to depend on the position of the person completing the survey or when the school was reviewed.

Those benefits with the highest support were:

- Clearly identified future goals and aspirations (69.0% of those identifying a benefit)
- Celebrate achievements and identify weaknesses (66.9%)
- Increased awareness and understanding (65.3%)
- Data analysis process indicates level of student achievement and whether school is achieving goals (55.1%)

In other words, the principal benefits identified by schools related to improved understanding of school performance (identifying strengths, weaknesses, performance levels and achievement; increased awareness and understanding) and better planning (future directions).

While a majority of respondents identified benefits associated with the use of data, some improvements in the data regime were proposed.

Improvements

Overall, 429 (67.0%) respondents suggested one or more improvements to the school review process.

Overall, schools proposed improvements in: aspects of the data regime; the timelines associated with school review; the involvement of various members of the school community; financial support for schools in the conduct of school review; various modifications to the verification day format and structure; increases in professional development for school panel members; and matching the reviewer to the needs of the school.

The improvements most often mentioned were:

- Improving the match of the management information system, CMIS, with review requirements (17.7%)
- Reducing unnecessary data (16.8%)
- Providing professional development support closer to the review process (15.6%)
- Coincide more closely the review process with the completion of the charter period. (14.7%)
- Provision of teacher release funding to increase staff involvement in data collection, document preparation and verification attendance (14.7%)
- Provision of a data checklist (14.0%)
- Increasing the flexibility of data requirements (13.5%)
- Digitising information (13.5%)
- Providing benchmark data earlier (13.1%)
- Inservicing of staff in data handling and analysis (10.3%)

The main improvements related to the need to improve aspects of the data including the provision of more and improved digital support, improved professional development support, increased financial and human resources provided and improved linkage between elements of the accountability framework.

Again, responses did not seem to depend on the position of the person completing the survey or when the school was reviewed.

Verification Meeting Time

The mean or average length of time for verification meeting in 1997 and 1998 was 6.3 hours with 87.4% of verification meetings taking at least half a day to complete. The mean length of time spent in verification meetings by individual panel members participants was 5.6 hours with 80.8% of participants involved for at least half of a day. Schools reviewed in 1998 had shorter verification meetings (mean of 5.7 hours compared to 7.0 hours) and people were involved for shorter periods (mean of 5.2 hours compared to 6.0 hours).

Summary

These findings suggest that the respondents are providing very strong endorsement of the school review process and the benefit of this for schools. In particular, as indicated by those questions rated most highly, the role of the school reviewer is highly regarded, but the positive responses to all the questions indicates that the school review process provides powerful insights into the school and strong direction for the next school charter.

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Victorian Auditor-General's Office (1997). *Schools of the Future: Valuing accountability.* Special Report No. 52, December 1997.

Appendix 1
School Annual Report Measures

Student Achievement

- Teachers' assessments of progress in English and Mathematics using the standards outlined in the Curriculum and Standards Framework: Year Preparatory - Year 10
- Average study scores: all studies Victorian Certificate of Education
- Average study scores: English and Mathematics: Victorian Certificate of Education

Curriculum Provision

- Time allocated in the curriculum to each of 8 Key Learning Areas

Parent and Student Opinion

- Scores on 6 parent survey scales using a 10% random sample of the parent population
- Scores on the 'Teachers and Teaching' scale using a random and representative sample of students

Staff Opinion

- Scores on 5 staff survey scales involving all staff

Student Absence

- Average annual rate of student absence by year level

Post School Destinations

- Destination of students leaving school post Year10, Year 11 and Year 12

Apparent Retention (secondary colleges only)

- Proportion of students beginning at Year 7 who remain to complete Year 12
- Proportion of students beginning the Victorian Certificate of Education who remain at school to complete the certificate

Other

- Staff participation in professional development
-